

A Facelift for Fires

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INTRODUCTION

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"No branch of the Army has suffered a greater identity crisis than Field Artillery, as a result of transformation, COIN-centric operations and the non-standard manpower demands of OIF/OEF."¹ These are the words of three maneuver brigade commanders in a white paper outlining one of the most alarming problems facing the Army today, the degradation of the field artillery to the point that delivery of lethal fires is no longer a simple task for most cannon battalions or fire support teams (FIST).

The field artillery branch currently oversees eight separate enlisted specialties; for an officer to remain technically and tactically proficient in such a wide range of skill sets is virtually impossible. The two most perishable of these skill sets essential to the delivery of fires, gunnery and fire support, have grown more challenging and specific and each requires enough expertise to warrant its own officer specialty. To combat the atrophy of core competency/ mission essential tasks, increase officer proficiency and retention, and negate the loss of division artillery (DIVARTY) the Army must create two separate officer MOS tracks within the field artillery branch.

BACKGROUND

¹ COLs Sean MacFarland, Michael Shields, and Jeffery Snow, White Paper, *The King and I: The Impending Crisis in Field Artillery's Ability to Provide Fire Support to Maneuver Commanders*.

The Army's recent transformation away from the DIVARTY has taken much of the blame for the branch's recent downward trend in proficiency, along with the ongoing operational tempo of the Global War on Terror which has prohibited units from conducting proper retraining. Neither of these excuses, however, eliminates the importance that fires hold during any type of mission (both traditional and asymmetrical). Many field artillery leaders have called for the introduction of additional fires brigades to establish an organic relationship with each active division in order to combat the deterioration of artillery specific skills. The branch has gone a step further in suggesting that mobile training teams be created at Fort Sill with a mission of retraining units at their home stations, acknowledging that units no longer have the ability to retrain on essential tasks internally.² Even with these proposed changes, junior officers in the branch face overwhelming odds while trying to remain proficient at critical skills.

ATROPHY OF CORE COMPETENCIES/ESSENTIAL TASKS

"[N]umerous non-standard missions have caused a critical atrophy in core competencies" states CSM Dean Keveles, Commandant of the NCO Academy at the Fires Center of Excellence.³

² MG Peter M. Vangjel, *The FA Campaign Plan*, http://sill-www.army.mil/firesbulletin/2008/Jul_Sep_2008/main.asp.

³ CSM Dean J. Keveles, "NCOES-Restoring NCO Core Competency", *Fires Bulletin*, September 2008, 20.

The overarching manpower needs of the Army during the GWOT have caused the majority of FA units to deploy and work outside of their primary MOS. In fact, the National Training Center and the Joint Readiness Training Center have reported following recent rotations, over 90% of 13 series (artillery) Soldiers and officers are deploying outside of their traditional skill set.⁴ The Combined Training Centers go on to state that most artillery units fire unsafely during their rotations, an alarming trend with no easy fix in sight.⁵ Both maneuver commanders and the chief of artillery seem to be in agreement that the skills of both FISTs and cannoneers have reached a point that units cannot even retrain themselves.

FT Sill has recently accepted the additional mission of creating mobile training teams that will travel to posts around the Army to assist units preparing for table evaluation.⁶ This solution will go a long ways in preparing cannon crews and fire direction centers to execute calls for fire but will fail to address the increased training demands for fire support teams.

With the recent addition of non-lethal fires as a core competency as outlined in Army *Field Manual 3-0, Operations*, fire supporters not only will need to retrain traditional skills

⁴ COLs Sean MacFarland, Michael Shields, and Jeffery Snow, White Paper, *The King and I: The Impending Crisis in Field Artillery's Ability to Provide Fire Support to Maneuver Commanders*.

⁵ CPT Jayson Morgan (NTC Observer/Controller), e-mail message to author, December 12, 2008.

⁶ MG Peter M. Vangjel, *The FA Campaign Plan*, http://sill-www.army.mil/firesbulletin/2008/Jul_Sep_2008/main.asp.

but also will need to master an entirely different yet equally important set.⁷ Currently, little if any attention during training is devoted to PSYOPs, IO, OPSEC, PA, or EW.⁸ In fact, while all these skills serve as non-lethal fires on the battlefield, the Army remains reliant on reserve units and sister services for their application. For example, electronic warfare officers must be borrowed from the Navy or Air Force.⁹ The best way to negotiate the issue of retraining traditional tasks while preparing for new and unforeseen requirements is to separate artillery into specialties which can focus their training efforts to fit the needs of the current fight while preparing for the next.

OFFICER PROFICIENCY AND RETENTION

The entire Army has seen recent issues with junior officer job satisfaction, which is reflected by low retention rates. The unprecedented incentives offered to company grade officers alone speak volumes on this issue. Arguably, an average of twelve months dwell time between deployments has done nothing to assist in satisfaction or retention. No branch has been hit harder by these issues than field artillery.

⁷ COL Frank J. Siltman and LTC John P. Frisbie, "Fire Support Just Got Harder: Adding Nonlethal Fires as a Core Competency", *Fires Bulletin*, September 2008, 6.

⁸ PSYOPS refers to Psychological Operations, IO to Information Operations, OPSEC to Operational Security, PA to Public Affairs, and EW to Electronic Warfare.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

Due to the current modular brigade combat team design, many artillery officers complete their time as lieutenants in maneuver battalions serving only as fire support officers. Additionally, those lucky enough to be assigned to a fires battalion have little experience in planning and executing artillery missions due to non-standard requirements. The increasing demand for non-lethal effects, as well as the immergence of new technologies (precision munitions, M777, electronic warfare capabilities, and unmanned aerial system targeting as examples) make the task to stay proficient quite daunting. As more demands are placed on fire supporters at the task force and company levels, specifically in the management of non-lethal fire support and targeting, the need for additional specialized training increases. This sentiment is seen even among senior artillerymen such as LTC Matter, Director of Fires and IO SJFHQ PACOM, who states: "We have arrived at a point in our history and development where Fire Support has become so complicated and requires such extensive knowledge that we need to establish its own MOS for officers."¹⁰

Junior officers are not currently confident in their abilities to maintain the technical aptitude necessary to serve as task force FSO or battery commander causing the branch to

¹⁰ LTC M. D. Matter, *Maintaining Core Competencies in an Era of Persistent Conflict*, http://usacac.army.mil/BLOG/blogs/why_i_serve/archive/2008/06/03/maintaining-core-competencies-in-an-era-of-persistent-conflict.aspx

become less appealing. This year, the fourth lowest graduate of West Point was able to select FA, and as recently as 2005 the branch was available for the lowest ranked cadet.¹¹ Until junior FA officers regain the confidence that they can become proficient in their assigned positions, this trend will not change. As LTC Matter alluded to above, the best way to ensure officers gain this confidence in their abilities is to separate FA into two officer specialties, thus narrowing the focus of officer training.

NEGATE THE LOSS OF DIVARTY:

The NTC has stated that the "entire sensor to shooter system is broken."¹² This is due to a lack of synchronization between the observer teams and the cannon units. FT Sill is addressing this issue by re-establishing the FA BN CDR as the senior fire support coordinator in each BCT in order to oversee the training and readiness of the FISTs.¹³ This will begin to address the synchronization issues with lethal fires but fails to acknowledge the problems on the gun line and in the fire direction centers.

¹¹ 2009 USMA Branch Posting Data

¹² COLs Sean MacFarland, Michael Shields, and Jeffery Snow, White Paper, *The King and I: The Impending Crisis in Field Artillery's Ability to Provide Fire Support to Maneuver Commanders*.

¹³ MG Peter M. Vangjel, *The FA Campaign Plan*, http://sill-www.army.mil/firesbulletin/2008/Jul_Sep_2008/main.asp.

Without a fires brigade or DIVARTY level of higher headquarters in each division, BN commanders will face increasing challenges in retraining junior officers on both FIST and gunnery responsibilities. By creating a completely separate MOS track, officers will have the ability to focus their training on more specific skills while still conducting non-standard missions in support of the GWOT. This separation of MOS could also potentially create additional LTC and COL level positions that were cut dramatically during the Army's transition to the BCT model (15 O-6 level FA commands have been removed in recent years).

If a change were to take place, it would allow the FA BN CDR to remain the subject matter expert on delivery and management of cannon and missile fires. Concurrently, the unit FSO could plan the lethal fires required by infantry or armored units as well as manage non-lethal shaping fires and effects. This division of labor and skills would negate the argument that the Army needs a single headquarters to oversee all aspects of fires in each unit because each BCT or BN would have command level slot designated as senior trainer and expert.

COUNTER ARGUMENT:

The largest and most compelling argument against splitting the artillery branch into separate tracks is that both specialties complement each other.¹⁴ In order to gain a true in depth understanding of lethal fire support, knowledge of delivery techniques is unquestionably valuable and vice versa. This argument fails to address the fact that most junior FA officers are not given adequate opportunities to learn either due to current training constraints caused by the GWOT. Furthermore, the introduction of additional non-lethal fire support tasks and the immergence of new technologies has increased the amount of information junior officers are attempting to master.

There is hope that the changes outlined in the Artillery Campaign Plan such as re-establishing the fires BN commander as the senior fire support expert will negate some of the training and synchronization issues. This will also help to ensure that the habitual relationship between fires battalions and brigade combat teams remains intact.¹⁵ These changes will not, however, address the problem that during an officer's time as a lieutenant (roughly three years) he or she can currently expect to spend at least one year working outside of a traditional artillery role and will likely not have the opportunity to gain

¹⁴ CPT Jayson Morgan (NTC Observer/Controller), e-mail message to author, December 12, 2008.

¹⁵ MG Peter M. Vangjel, *The FA Campaign Plan*, http://sill-www.army.mil/firesbulletin/2008/Jul_Sep_2008/main.asp.

valuable time as both a fire direction officer and fire support officer at the company level. While demands on each specialty continue to increase, the importance of experience cannot be understated prior to assignment as battery commander or BN FSO.

Some observers are quick to point out that while artillery has lost numerous O-6 level positions, artillerymen remain eligible for command of maneuver BCTs. As of the current time, however, no artilleryman has been selected for this role despite the fact that former DIVARTY commanders have recently continued on to higher commands with great success creating a perceived "glass ceiling" on career advancement.¹⁶

CONCLUSION:

"I have always felt that fire support and gunnery are not the same. They are related but their skill sets are entirely different. Gunnery is a science...Fire Support is an art" states LTC Matter.¹⁷ As technology advances the way the Army prosecutes targets in a lethal fashion as well as in the collections and non-lethal effects available, the demands on artillerymen will only grow. Given the current operating environment and time restrictions while training on core competencies (which are

¹⁶ MG Jeffery Hammond is the current commander of 4th ID. General Raymond Odierno, Multi National Force-Iraq Commander. Both are former 1st CAV DIVARTY commanders.

¹⁷ LTC M. D. Matter, *Maintaining Core Competencies in an Era of Persistent Conflict*, http://usacac.army.mil/BLOG/blogs/why_i_serve/archive/2008/06/03/maintaining-core-competencies-in-an-era-of-persistent-conflict.aspx

increasing with non-lethal effects), junior artillery officers will undoubtedly struggle to catch up.

Without a higher headquarters to manage and oversee training, units are becoming increasingly reliant on FT Sill and other outside experts for assistance. Because of all of this, company grade officers are unprepared for future assignments and unsatisfied in the artillery as a branch. If given the opportunity to refocus on a specific skill set, artillery officers and effects coordinators/fire supporters would be able to serve as better combat multipliers for the maneuver units that rely on them to shape the battlefield and set the conditions for success.

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